Macho Ado About Nothing

The ballad of Phil Lynott by Patrick Humphries. Pic by Tom Sheehan

IN Dublin – Phil Lynott's home town – his reputation is such that others now bask in his reflected glory. As in cities all over the world there are those who try to make their own way, to carve their own niche, but who are constantly overshadowed.

In Dublin's case, there's a guy, tall and black, who – because of Lynott's infamy – is simply known as "The Other One".

Phil Lynott still has a house in Dublin. It's a city he still regards with affection – he says it's his home. But it's easy to overlook Lynott's Irish ancestry, as Thin Lizzy are one of those mega bands which straddle datelines and frontiers. Their success is universal, as assured of an ovation in Dallas as Hammersmith.

Personally, I'd never been a rabid Lizzy fan. Their singles stayed on my horizon, while their particular brand of hard rock I found I could manage without. But there was always Lynott, and Lynott I always found interesting.

There was the initial fascination of this Irish guy who looked like Hendrix, on "Top Of The Pops", coasting through the traditional "Whiskey In The Jar". The unsuccessful follow up, "Rudolph's Tango", had its own quirky charm, and it was Lynott's avowed interest in traditional Irish music which I found strange.

It was the incongruity. For many, Lynott is the personification of Richard Pryor's "Macho man", as typified by the cover of Lizzy's "Live And Dangerous": Lynott caught in a crossfire of searchlights, the cynosure of all eyes, glistening leather trousers, clenched fist rampant over the menacing bass.

Yet Lynott's love of traditional music is well known, with perhaps the title track of Lizzy's tenth album the most obvious example.

"Black Rose" is based on a 19th Century poem based on Irish myths, which weaves a number of traditional songs (like the McPeakes' "Wild Mountain Thyme", which has seen service in the hands of everyone from Bob Dylan to Van Morrison) around Lynott's composition.

I met Phil Lynott at the London studio where Thin Lizzy had just finished three months work on their latest album, "Trouble Boys". Lynott had been working there as well, on his second solo album, "Fatalistic Attitude."

We began by talking about his work with the traditionally based Irish group De Danann; there are two tracks in the can – "The Beat Of The Drum" and Ewan MacColl's "Dirty Old Town" – which haven't appeared on his album, but the band were so impressed that they could well turn up on a future Lizzy album.

Lynott stressed it was *Irish* traditional music he loved.

"I think the Celts had a little more flair, especially with the airs . . . a lot of the folk artists realise what contemporary music can do, and they're learning a lot about recording. Paul Brady's got a great new album ('Hard Station'), and Christy Moore's got a brilliant new electric band".

Obviously a great deal of Lynott's musical heritage came from his Dublin background:

"I know Paddy Moloney of the Chieftains, but Dublin is so small you end up meeting musicians from all walks of life, whether it be folk, showbands, cabaret, rock . . ."

So Dublin's got the upper hand on London then? A freer meeting of musical minds.

"It's called pubs, actually . . . in London you're spoiled for choice. In Dublin you know which are the places to go. It's not some little haven, it actually ends up being very frustrating . . . in a way you feel stifled, and the big move is to come to England."

WHAT about the new Irish bands that have sprung up?

"I like U2 a lot, although our music is very different. But the Undertones are strange. I saw 'em in New York, and just walked up to the bass player after the gig to say 'Hello', you know, two Irishmen in New York, and the first thing he said was 'I have to tell you now I don't like your music,' I mean, for fuck's sake! I like their singles though, and Stiff Little Fingers. In general, I just like to see Irish bands do well."

How did he feel about Thin Lizzy's image, the leathers and clenched fists?

"You can call us a heavy metal band, and it doesn't really upset me, unless by HM you're trying to categorise us with a riff type monster band, which I don't think Thin Lizzy is. But I would definitely agree that we're a hard rock band. We do portray that tough, mean image."

That "tough, mean image" came in for a lot of criticism recently with the release of "Killer On The Loose", which many interpreted as a tasteless piece of anti-feminism.

"Yeah, but they're stupid. If they honestly thought I was trying to glorify rape . . ." Lynott shook his head disconsolately.

But it *is* a dangerous topic for such a macho band to tackle, particularly in the light of the Yorkshire Ripper murders.

"Yeah, but I wanted to make the statement: 'Don't go out on your own at night if you're a young girl'.

"For me, that particular song was the best way I could do it, by assuming the role . . . There's about three songs where I've been called a chauvinist, but I was really trying to tell the girls the truth, you know.

"When guys go out in a gang it's 'The boys are back', there's that feeling of cameraderie, and it is a chauvinistic thing, but it is there . . . And 'Ladykiller', I mean, I've read stacks of articles that Prince Andrew is a ladykiller! Does that mean he goes out and kills ladies? . . .

"You have to be true to yourself, and I know in me own heart that it wasn't capitalising on the fact of Jack the Ripper."

Was the title of his new solo album a reflection of his own feelings?

"The solo albums are a great release, I can be introverted and put it out, which is why 'Fatalistic Attitude' is like the depressive side. You know, 'Do you ever get sad?', 'Are you always so cocky?'

"It gives an insight into that side of me, but when I'm on stage I'm an extrovert. I couldn't keep that intensity of an introvert in front of 3,000 people, but when I hit a stage, with 50,000 watts of power, off I go, and I don't come back till the end of the show."

Did he ever consciously dwell on his own image?

"Yeah, I was becoming the image . . . I found it far easier to handle when I was a single fella, when I didn't have to worry about family life. I found it easier to be outrageous when I didn't have a wife and kids."

Lynott has shown he can manage without Thin Lizzy, his own solo albums, three books of poetry and sporadic work with the Greedy Bastards displayed his versatility. While he stresses the democracy within the band, as chief writer of Thin Lizzy's materi and the band's front man, he *is* fo many people Thin Lizzy. I wondered how he viewed the future, the idea of being an ageing rock star?

"I think that's another fallacy created by the music papers, that you have to be young to be a rock star. Obviously I won't be able to jump around when I'm older, but hopefully by then my music'll be so good I won't *have* to jump around.

"James Brown was playing before I started and he's really playing, and he's still jumping around . . . Jagger and Townshend really crumbled under the punk thing, they took the brunt of that barrage and they folded, they had no defence at all. I have. We're a good band!"

Finally, thinking of Milton Keynes and their forthcoming autumn tour, I wondered about the difficulties facing Lizzy in getting just the right set together for their stage shows?

"It's one of the biggest problems of being successful. There's X amount of numbers that are always there. For example, for years we had problems with 'Whiskey In The Jar'.

"The audience wanted to hear it, but there were certain members of the band – not me – who hated it, and didn't want to play it.

"The Lizzy supporters, I think like to hear new numbers as well as the old, but it takes time. By the end of the tour, the last two shows, we usually have the balance right."